

Shaplen's Road: Well-Trod

Vietnam, 1965-70: the road from war? An unsettling title for a book three-fifths of which covers years of American buildup and escalation in Vietnam. And the irony has sharpened since the manuscript was sent to the publisher. It then consisted of 22 of Robert Shaplen's articles for *The New Yorker* (shortened and edited), the last of these having appeared Jan. 31, 1970, under the regular caption, "Letter from Saigon."

Shaplen's next *New Yorker* piece, three months later, bore a new heading for the series: "Letter from Indochina." Shaplen had clearly not anticipated that the road from war in Vietnam lay, for some U.S. troops, west through Cambodia; or that what we were on was, all along, the road to the Second Indochina War.

If that last phrase would be a better title for this book, it will still serve for his next, and most readers might be well advised to wait for that one. But it is questionable whether Shaplen should repeat the experiment of his present format, which lays successive pieces of current reportage end to end. Shaplen's distinguished reporting, complex, reflective and experienced, is produced in the form of long, dull essays. Hence the temptation simply to reprint them as a "journal," preserving their present tense, their burden of false starts and alarms.

But the effect is cruel to content. It calls into question the very relevance of Shaplen's chosen beat, the "political" side of the war as

THE ROAD FROM WAR: Vietnam 1965-1970.

By Robert Shaplen.

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Shaplen defines it: primarily Saigon maneuvering and "pacification" operations in the countryside. Most of what Shaplen covers does, indeed, go unreported elsewhere; but it is hard to find that negligent when one rereads these columns in sequence.

Is there really need, still, for even one reporter to alert us monthly or quarterly to new "challenges" to the cohesion of Saigon elites and the reformist instincts of corrupt military juntas, "tests" that — as subsequent reports reveal unsurprisingly — are never met; or "new" pacification gimmicks by CIA and MACV, that invariably turn out to be hollow, brutal frauds; or new "opportunities" — certain to be missed — for the U.S. government to reduce its ignorance and "miscomprehension," correct its well-intentioned "mistakes," and shoulder "revolutionary" and "democratizing" missions that bear no relation to the aims or perceived interests of any American administration? Shaplen's own memory for such "lessons" seems, sometimes, as short as that of the American officials whose "deliberate ingenuousness" he deplors.

Shaplen plausibly disdains

the military focus of most news coverage in this war. (His own essay here at combat reporting, "Below the D.M.Z.," is perhaps a parody; meticulous notetaking has left nearly every sentence so studded with numbers — unit designations and pointless statistics — as to be comically unreadable.) Yet he demonstrates here that there is as much froth to report about "politics" as about military operations. Most of what Shaplen chooses to recount, in fact, is exactly as transient and meaningless as wire service dispatches, kill-ratios and (imaginary) changes in the level of ARVN night patrolling. And nothing shows that so clearly as this very book.

How can Shaplen still take seriously all these non-events, this gossip and scheming, these clumsy rediscoveries of French colonial techniques? In his preface, after all, he reiterates the message of his earlier (1965) title, *The Lost Revolution*: that at some point in the preceding 20 years we had "lost" the nationalist revolutionary cause in Vietnam to the Communists. (In reality, we cannot have sought such a cause, and a nationalist revolution,

surely, could never be ours to lose any more than Vietnam — or China — was ours to lose).

In any case, time and again Shaplen asserts that its "capture" by the Communists was irreversible, "incurable," perhaps in 1945, certainly by 1965.

Why, then, do we keep confronting, sometimes in the same columns, restatements of the uncertainty or "question" or "challenge" classically expressed (p. 31): "It remains to be seen whether somehow, late as it is, the true nationalists [i.e., non-Communists, especially those friendly to and supported by the CIA] can recapture the revolution from the Communists after 20 years of bitter and futile strife?"

After eight years of Shaplen's own reporting from Vietnam this would seem as much of a non-question, or as weak a vehicle for maintaining readers' suspense, as the recurrent speculation throughout the first half of the book whether Nguyen Cao Ky would try to run for president.

If the hopes of those, to paraphrase Shaplen's dedication, who believed that American intervention could further "revolution with freedom" in Vietnam were ever faintly realistic (and whether they were or not, I once shared them) it is hard as this book wears on to read the avowed persistence of such hopes as anything but wildly wishful or obscurantist, a cop-out from the moral and policy implications of what Shaplen really knows about Vietnam.